

[This was excised for reasons of symmetry: Hass did not single out other ethics for similar treatment – Robert Von Stricker Beresford]

Utilitarianism, the idea that an action is good because it benefits the most people, is potentially dangerous because it devalues individuals. It, like many other theories about ethics and politics, is about collective good (although in this case it is under the guise of individual good): the greatest good for the greatest number. Yet this criticism has been around a long time, and is pretty sound (at least I think so; Peter Singer disagrees). There is nothing about utilitarianism as an ideology that prevents it from being taken to its logical extremes (like all collective-oriented political ideas and many individualist ones). On the other hand, we are forced to make utilitarian decisions on a daily basis. We cannot avoid utilitarian choices in life, but we can (and should) condemn a system built solely on such decisions, especially if human life is to be the standard.

The thing is, there is a deeper problem here than just the apparent ethical problem with systematized utilitarianism. I'm not necessarily saying utilitarians are wrong about humans enjoying pleasure, and I'm not saying they're wrong about self-interest. I would argue that utilitarians merely elevated these two truths above everything else, resulting in an inaccurate picture of the complexity of human affairs. When such a view is followed to its logical conclusions it turns into something inhuman, as is always the case.

The quest to find a calculus of morality is as doomed as the quest to find the one perfect moral code. There is no system that will solve all our problems. Utilitarianism appears more evil to many of us because it dispenses with the spiritual cloaks of previous moralities. The nastiness of those earlier moralities was always disguised in ceremony and ritual and references to higher powers. The nastiness of utilitarianism is plain for most to see because it doesn't hide behind these things. That doesn't make it worse than the previous codes – in fact it is better in that sense because at least utilitarians are honest that there will be negative consequences for some. On the other hand, just because utilitarianism claims some kind of scientific basis doesn't make it less dangerous than earlier supposed total solutions

to our problems.